Who Came First? Scholarly and Theological Explorations of Jewish and Christian Origins—With a Reflection on the Crucifixion as an Ending

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The question of who was the "first Jew" or the "first Christian" is more than historical—it's theological, narrative, and deeply contested. This paper takes up this question not merely to find a chronological answer, but to explore how identity is formed, remembered, and interpreted. Traditional narratives point to Abraham, Moses, Mary, or Paul. Modern scholars complicate these figures, showing how their identities were shaped retrospectively. But at the heart of this inquiry lies a provocative thesis: **that Judaism, as a revelatory covenantal project, ends with the crucifixion of Jesus.** This is not a historical claim that Jewish people disappeared, nor a denial of the continuity of Jewish practice. Rather, it is a theological view: that with the death of Jesus—the final offering, the broken covenant, the veil torn—Judaism, as a vessel of divine revelation, is fulfilled and concluded. What follows is not merely a sect or movement, but a transformation of identity. In this light, Jesus dying a Jew is the final chapter of Judaism and the preface to Christianity. This paper examines how religious traditions construct their beginnings, the irony of endings that are really beginnings, and how the notion of "firsts" conceals deeper ruptures.

Keywords: Jewish identity, Christian origins, Abraham, Mary, Paul, covenant, resurrection, Torah, Jesus of Nazareth, crucifixion, supersessionism, religious irony, identity rupture, theological fulfillment, early Christianity, Judaism's transformation.

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I. Introduction

The search for "firsts" in religious history is not merely an exercise in chronology; it is an exploration of identity, legitimacy, and transformation. Asking who was the *first Jew* or *first Christian* opens a cascade of foundational questions: What does it mean to belong to a faith? Is identity primarily a matter of belief, ritual, ancestry, law, or divine election? Religious communities often frame their origin stories in personal terms—tracing lineage to a patriarch or confessor—but such beginnings are always constructed in hindsight, shaped by theology as much as by history. In this way, "firsts" are not discovered; they are narrated, symbolized, and claimed.

This paper approaches the topic of religious origin with both scholarly caution and theological commitment. The author's point of view, admittedly theological rather than purely historical, asserts that **Judaism, as a divinely revealed and covenantal system, ends with the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth**. This claim does not deny the ongoing reality of Jewish people or their traditions, but holds that the revelatory mission of Judaism—its sacrificial system, covenantal framework, and messianic expectation—finds both fulfillment and termination in the death of Christ. In that moment, the veil of the temple is torn (Mark 15:38), the final sacrifice is offered (Hebrews 10:12), and the covenantal apparatus of Judaism is consummated.

The irony, of course, is that **Jesus was born a Jew, lived as a Jew, and died as a Jew**. He observed Torah, participated in Jewish festivals, taught in synagogues, and interpreted the Law within the rabbinic debates of his time. He was hailed and condemned as "King of the Jews," a title both messianic and politically subversive. That Christianity arises from his death—and often in tension with the community that shaped him—reveals the paradox at the heart of religious transformation. If the cross marks the end of Judaism, it does so in the body of a Jew.

This irony, rather than undermining the thesis, reinforces it. It demonstrates that **religious identity is rarely fixed or singular**; it is layered, dynamic, and often forged through rupture. Judaism did not cease to exist sociologically or ethnically at the crucifixion, but—according to this theological reading—it ceased to function as the living conduit of divine revelation. In its place, a new identity emerges: one rooted not in the covenant of Sinai, but in the new covenant sealed in blood (Luke 22:20). The followers of Jesus, beginning with Mary, Peter, and Paul, are not merely Jews with a new idea; they are the first Christians, members of a new body whose identity rests in the resurrection rather than the Law.

The rest of this paper traces this conceptual transformation by examining the major figures often proposed as "firsts" in Judaism and Christianity. It engages modern scholarly perspectives, but does not relinquish the theological claim that the cross is both an ending and a beginning—the final punctuation of Judaism and the opening line of Christian identity.

II. Scholarly Foundations on Jewish Origins

Before assessing who might rightly be called the “first Jew,” it is essential to address the complexity—and fluidity—of what "Jewish identity" means across time. Scholars generally agree that the category “Jew” (*Yehudi*) is not static or self-evident in the biblical world. Rather, it is an evolving identity formed through theological, political, and historical developments. The term derives from *Yehudah* (Judah), originally the name of one of Jacob’s sons and later the southern kingdom after the division of Israel. Over time, it came to refer not only to members of that tribe or kingdom, but to the entire people who adhered to the covenantal faith associated with the God of Israel.

1. The Historical Evolution of “Jewish” Identity

Biblical scholar Michael Fishbane emphasizes that the Hebrew Bible presents a series of layered covenants and evolving divine-human relationships, rather than a single unified identity from Genesis onward. The early patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—are portrayed as ancestors of the Israelite people, but they do not observe Mosaic law, nor do they live within a structured covenantal community. The patriarchal narratives, in Fishbane's view, function as literary and theological prototypes retroactively shaped by later Israelite (and post-exilic) understandings of their national and religious identity.

Jon Levenson likewise warns against reading back later Jewish concepts into earlier biblical figures. In *Inheriting Abraham*, Levenson argues that Abraham’s significance is deeply multivalent—claimed by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—but not reducible to modern Jewish identity. Abraham’s covenant is not synonymous with Mosaic law or the post-exilic religion known as Judaism. While Genesis emphasizes Abraham’s faith and divine calling, it does not present him as a "Jew" in the sense of law-observance or temple affiliation. This distinction becomes critical when contrasting theological claims—such as the idea that Judaism ends at the crucifixion—with historical reconstructions that show its long evolution.

2. The Torah, the Covenant, and the Post-Exilic Community

Most scholars date the formation of Judaism as a recognizable religion to the **post-exilic period** (after 586 BCE), when the Babylonian exile forced a shift from temple-based worship to Torah-centered life. During this time, covenantal theology, national restoration hopes, and textual preservation became the primary vehicles for Jewish identity. William Dever, an archaeologist specializing in ancient Israel, argues that prior to the exile, Israelite religion was a form of *Yahwism*—a regional, henotheistic belief system embedded in tribal culture—not yet the monotheistic Judaism of later centuries. The exile catalyzed a transformation, turning Israelite identity into something more theological and portable.

James Kugel reinforces this in *How to Read the Bible*, arguing that the Torah became not only scripture but constitution. The covenant became not merely a divine promise, but a binding contract that defined communal life, law, ethics, and theology. This shift marks a clear divergence from the earlier, loosely defined family-of-Abraham identity to the structured, law-based religion that shaped Second Temple Judaism.

Chabad.org and other traditional Jewish sources acknowledge this evolution while maintaining a theological through-line that links Abraham to the Jewish people. For example, in articles like *Was Abraham Jewish?*, Chabad affirms that while Abraham predates the formal giving of the Torah, he is considered Jewish by virtue of entering into the first covenant and practicing many of the mitzvot voluntarily. This view preserves a sense of continuity, even where historical scholarship sees significant breaks.

3. Scholarly Caution on Projecting Later Judaism Backward

A key methodological issue across biblical scholarship is **anachronism**—the projection of later religious categories onto earlier periods. The term "Jew" (*Yehudi*) does not appear in the Pentateuch and is used sparsely in earlier texts, often in a political or tribal sense. To call Abraham the "first Jew," as both religious tradition and modern apologetics often do, risks flattening the layered development of Jewish identity across centuries.

Scholars like Fishbane and Levenson emphasize that **Jewishness as we understand it today—defined by Torah observance, covenant theology, and communal boundaries—cannot be retrofitted onto figures who lived long before these structures were codified**. While religious communities may symbolically identify with Abraham, Moses, or Judah as founders or archetypes, the scholarly task is to distinguish between **retrospective religious memory** and **historical development**.

Summary of Section II

Jewish identity is not born in a single moment, nor in a single individual. It is a cumulative construct shaped by covenantal narratives, exilic trauma, religious reform, and evolving theological commitments. While Abraham may be called the first Jew in theological memory, he did not live within the religious framework later called Judaism. Moses introduced the Torah, Judah gave the name, and the post-exilic community defined the religion.

From a scholarly standpoint, the question "Who was the first Jew?" resists simple answers. But from a theological standpoint—especially one that sees **Jesus as the end of Judaism's covenantal mission**—this complexity becomes even more significant. It prepares the ground for the next section, where various candidates for "first Jew" are considered, not merely

historically, but in light of their role in salvation history that culminates, paradoxically, in a Jewish crucifixion.

III. Who Was the First Jew?

The search for the "first Jew" is a deeply interpretive exercise, because "Jewishness" itself is not a singular, historically fixed identity. Depending on whether one defines Jewish identity in terms of covenant, ethnicity, law, national belonging, or divine mission, different figures in the Hebrew Bible could plausibly be proposed as the original Jew. What emerges from scholarly and theological reflection alike is that the "first Jew" is not so much a singular individual as a symbolic position within a larger narrative arc—a position that, in the author's theological reading, ultimately finds its fulfillment and termination in Jesus Christ.

A. Abraham — Theological Father, But Pre-Torah

Abraham is the most traditional and widespread candidate for the title "first Jew." He is called by God in Genesis 12, given a covenant in Genesis 15, and receives circumcision as a sign of that covenant in Genesis 17. Rabbinic tradition hails him as *Avraham Avinu*—Abraham our Father—and credits him with keeping the entire Torah voluntarily even before it was given (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 28b). His willingness to sacrifice Isaac, his hospitality, and his faith all serve as spiritual paradigms within Judaism.

However, from a critical scholarly standpoint, Abraham lived **prior to the giving of the Law**, prior to the formation of Israel as a nation, and before the concept of "Jew" (*Yehudi*) existed. Jon Levenson notes that Abraham should not be conflated with later Jewish religious identity; rather, he is a "founder" figure whose image is retrofitted to later theological concerns. His covenant was personal and tribal, not national or legalistic.

From the author's perspective, Abraham is a preparatory figure—not the fullness of Jewish identity, but the seed from which the vine grows. He is the "beginning of beginnings," whose faith anticipates the fulfillment of the covenant not in Moses, but ultimately in Christ.

B. Isaac and Jacob — Continuity of Covenant, Israel as Nation

Isaac, Abraham's son, is the first person **born into the covenant**, making him arguably the first Jew by birthright. He is circumcised on the eighth day and inherits the divine promise without renegotiation. Yet Isaac's role in the biblical narrative is curiously passive; he is more a vessel of continuity than a character of innovation.

Jacob (renamed *Israel*) is more active and complex. He fathers the twelve tribes, and his story (Genesis 25–49) explores themes of struggle, deception, and reconciliation. The name *Israel* becomes the national identity of the Jewish people. In that sense, Jacob is the first "Israelite" in the literal sense.

But again, from a scholarly perspective, these figures predate the formal structure of Judaism as a religion. Michael Fishbane emphasizes that the patriarchal stories were likely shaped during or after the exile to create a coherent narrative of origins. The identity of “Israel” is constructed retrospectively.

Theologically, Isaac and Jacob represent the continuation of a divine promise—faithful branches of Abraham’s tree—but they do not yet bear the fruit of covenantal maturity, which, in this reading, only blossoms with the law and ultimately with the Messiah.

C. Judah — Namesake, Post-Exilic Retrojection

The name *Jew* (*Yehudi*) derives from **Judah**, the fourth son of Jacob. His tribe survives the destruction of the Northern Kingdom and becomes the political and religious center of Jewish life in the post-exilic period. After the exile, “Judahite” becomes shorthand for all those faithful to the God of Israel. The term “Jew” first appears in the Bible in 2 Kings 16:6 and becomes common in the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

Judah himself is not a paradigmatic figure of righteousness—he is complicit in selling Joseph, yet later shows deep repentance and leadership (Genesis 44). Rabbinic and messianic traditions elevate him because King David and the Messiah are said to descend from him.

In literary terms, **Judah is not the first Jew**, but the source of the *term* "Jew." From a theological standpoint, he functions symbolically as a **bridge between tribal lineage and eschatological hope**. His name becomes a vessel that carries forward Jewish identity, and thus is central to the irony that **Jesus, the one who “ends” Judaism in the author’s view, is called the “Lion of Judah”** (Revelation 5:5).

D. Moses — Lawgiver and Religious Founder

Moses is perhaps the strongest candidate for the first Jew **in the religious and legal sense**. He receives the Torah, institutes ritual and civil law, leads the people out of Egypt, and mediates between God and Israel. The covenant at Sinai (Exodus 19–24) marks a formalization of Jewish identity as a legal, ethical, and spiritual community. The Mishnah even begins with the assertion: *“Moses received the Torah from Sinai...”* (Avot 1:1).

From a historical standpoint, scholars like William Dever and James Kugel see the Sinai narrative as a foundational myth—not false, but formative—crafted during or after the exile to unify disparate tribal traditions. Moses may or may not be a historical individual, but his literary role is that of the **originator of Jewish religion as a law-based system**.

From the author's theological POV, Moses represents the **high point of the Old Covenant**, but also its **limitation**. The Torah he receives anticipates Christ (Galatians 3:24), and the law he delivers is ultimately surpassed by grace. In this light, Moses is not the first Jew, but the **final architect of the system that Jesus will fulfill and dissolve**.

E. Others — Symbolic or Inclusive Candidates (Sarah, Tamar, Joseph)

Figures like **Sarah**, **Tamar**, and **Joseph** offer **symbolic or inclusive dimensions** of Jewish identity.

- **Sarah**, as matriarch, is the first woman to be explicitly part of the covenant and is promised a child by God. She embodies faith and divine election, though her role is often overshadowed.
- **Tamar**, who ensures the continuation of Judah's line (Genesis 38), becomes an unlikely symbol of righteousness and is included in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1).
- **Joseph**, who preserves Israel in exile and maintains faith in God while governing in Egypt, is often seen as the prototype of the faithful Jew in the diaspora.

These figures may not be the "first" Jews historically or legally, but they expand the meaning of Jewish identity—showing it includes **women, Gentiles, outsiders, and liminal figures**. Their inclusion prefigures Christianity's expansion beyond ethnic Israel.

Scholarly Tension: No Clear "First"—Multiple Emergence Points

The **academic consensus** is that no single figure can be definitively called "the first Jew." The term itself shifts over time, and religious identity is always a constructed narrative. Fishbane, Levenson, Kugel, and others emphasize that **the Bible retroactively constructs identity to serve theological ends**.

This lack of clarity is not a failure—it is a feature. It shows that religious identity grows organically, branching through myth, memory, and interpretation.

Author's Thread: All Figures Lead Toward Jesus, the Culmination

In the author's theological view, each of these figures is a stepping stone. Abraham initiates the journey, Moses codifies it, Judah names it—but **Jesus completes it**. All covenantal meaning, prophetic anticipation, and symbolic identity **converge on the crucifixion**, where the Old Covenant ends and the New begins. Therefore, to ask who was the first Jew is, ultimately, to point toward the one in whom Jewish identity reaches both its fulfillment and its closure.

IV. Jesus and the Crucifixion as a Fulcrum

The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth stands at the historical and theological hinge between Judaism and Christianity. It is not merely the end of a prophet's life, nor just the execution of a political dissident; it is, in the author's theological reading, the culmination and **termination of Judaism's revelatory mission**. In that singular moment—where the temple veil is torn, the final sacrifice is made, and the Son of God breathes His last—Judaism is both fulfilled and completed. What emerges from that death is not simply a Jewish sect with a new idea, but something entirely new: Christianity.

Jesus as a Faithful Jew

The irony of this claim begins with an undeniable fact: **Jesus lived and died as a Jew**. He was born to Jewish parents, circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21), observed Jewish law, taught in synagogues (Mark 1:21), celebrated Passover (Luke 22:7–8), and engaged with the leading theological currents of Second Temple Judaism. He quoted Torah, revered the prophets, and debated Pharisees on matters of halakha. His teachings often echoed and intensified Jewish law ("You have heard it said... but I say to you," Matthew 5).

Scholars such as E.P. Sanders and Paula Fredriksen emphasize that Jesus must be understood as operating **within** Judaism, not outside or against it. He did not reject the covenant; rather, He claimed to **fulfill** it (Matthew 5:17). In this sense, His Jewishness is not incidental—it is essential to the logic of both the crucifixion and the theological rupture that follows.

The Crucifixion as Covenantal Rupture

The crucifixion is not merely a brutal execution—it is a **covenantal event**. In the Gospels, cosmic and symbolic elements abound: darkness covers the land (Luke 23:44), the earth quakes (Matthew 27:51), and most strikingly, **the veil of the temple is torn in two** (Mark 15:38). This act, traditionally interpreted as the tearing of the barrier between God and humanity, also

signals a **theological shift**—the old covenant mediated through temple sacrifice is now obsolete.

The Letter to the Hebrews makes this point explicit: "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). The Levitical priesthood is no longer necessary; the blood of bulls and goats is replaced by the blood of Christ. The *new covenant*, promised in Jeremiah 31, is inaugurated not by law, but by **grace and faith**.

From this perspective, the crucifixion is not merely the tragic end of a righteous man, but the **termination of the Mosaic covenant**. It is the final Passover, the ultimate Yom Kippur, the sacrifice that renders all others obsolete.

The Irony of Jewishness Ending in a Jew's Death

Here lies the profound irony: if Judaism ends at the cross, it does so **in the body of a Jew**. Jesus is not a Gentile reformer. He does not reject Torah, but embodies it. He does not abolish sacrifice, but offers Himself as the final one. And yet, His death marks the **end** of Judaism's covenantal function.

This irony deepens the theological weight of the moment. Jesus is simultaneously the **last Jew**—the final bearer of the covenant—and the **first Christian**, the inaugurator of a new identity. That the Law should be fulfilled in the death of a law-keeper, that the temple should be superseded by one who loved its rituals, is no accident—it is the shape of Christian theology. Death, in this case, is not negation but **transformation**.

Supersession as Fulfillment, Not Replacement

The author's perspective aligns with a **fulfillment-based view of supersessionism**, rather than a replacement theology. Christianity does not emerge by rejecting Judaism, but by completing it. As Jesus says, "I have not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it" (Matthew 5:17). Fulfillment implies continuity with difference—a telos, not a betrayal.

In this view, **Judaism is the scaffolding that builds toward the incarnation**, the Law is the tutor that leads to grace (Galatians 3:24), and the prophets are voices that echo into the Gospel. The sacrificial system, temple rituals, and covenantal signs all point forward—to the one who is both priest and offering. Once Christ dies, the system has done its work; it is dignified in its fulfillment, not discarded in disgrace.

This distinguishes the theological claim from anti-Judaism: it sees Judaism not as wrong, but as **temporarily right**—a stage in salvation history that ends with Jesus. Supersession, here, is a transfer of covenant, not a condemnation of the past.

Theological Implications: Not a Break, but a Transformation

The crucifixion, therefore, does not shatter Judaism—it **transforms** it. The Law becomes internal (Romans 2:29), the temple becomes the body of believers (1 Corinthians 6:19), and identity becomes spiritual rather than genealogical (Philippians 3:3). In this transformed covenant, salvation is extended to all nations—not by converting Gentiles into Jews, but by **inviting both into something new**.

From this theological standpoint, Judaism's role as the exclusive carrier of divine revelation **ends at the cross**. This does not mean Jewish history or identity ceases, but that its revelatory phase is concluded. What begins is a new phase of divine-human relationship—not mediated by Torah, but by Christ.

Author's POV: Judaism Culminates in Jesus

In the author's theological framework, Jesus is not the founder of a new religion so much as the **fulfiller of the old one**. All Jewish history, all covenantal striving, all prophetic longing **finds its telos in Him**. The crucifixion is not a break with the past—it is the past coming to its God-ordained climax. Just as Abraham began the journey, Moses codified it, and David hoped for its completion, Jesus fulfills it by dying as the ultimate offering.

In this light, **Judaism ends at the cross—not because it failed, but because it succeeded.** It carried the divine story to its culmination. The Law has been fulfilled, the Messiah has come, the temple curtain has been torn—and nothing remains but for a new people to be born, defined not by circumcision, but by baptism; not by Sinai, but by Calvary.

Tension: From Jews to Christians—Not a Continuation, But a New Creation

This transformation creates a fundamental identity shift. Jesus' earliest followers were Jewish by ethnicity and practice, but **their faith in the crucified and risen Messiah placed them outside the boundaries of Judaism's covenantal logic**. They were not merely "post-Jews" or Messianic Israelites—they were something new: **Christians**.

Paul captures this transformation in radical terms: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The continuity of story gives way to the discontinuity of identity. Those who follow Jesus do not continue Judaism; they embody its transformed essence. They are no longer keepers of the old covenant, but citizens of the kingdom inaugurated in death and resurrection.

V. Who Was the First Christian?

If Judaism ends at the cross, Christianity begins in its shadow. But this raises a difficult and provocative question: **who, then, was the first Christian?** The answer is not merely a matter of historical sequencing; it depends on how one defines Christian identity: belief in Jesus as Messiah? Recognition of the resurrection? Participation in a new covenantal reality? Leadership in the early Church? Each criterion yields a different candidate, and each offers insight into how the early community understood itself in continuity and in contrast with its Jewish roots.

Scholars are nearly unanimous in warning against anachronistically applying the label "Christian" to figures in the Gospels. Paula Fredriksen and others stress that the earliest followers of Jesus did not see themselves as abandoning Judaism but rather as witnessing its fulfillment. The term *Christianoi* (“Christians”) only emerges in Acts 11:26, and even then as a designation from outsiders. Coleman Baker highlights that early Christian identity was not formed overnight but evolved through ethnic, theological, and narrative conflicts that defined the movement’s boundaries over time.

Yet from the theological standpoint developed in this paper, **Christianity is born not in Jesus’ teachings, but in His death**. The first Christians, therefore, are those who saw the crucifixion not as the tragic end of a messianic hope but as the glorious beginning of a new covenant. This reorients the question: not “Who followed Jesus during His life?” but **“Who recognized Him after His death?”**

A. Mary — First to Believe

Mary, the mother of Jesus, represents the earliest and most intimate act of faith in the Christian narrative. At the Annunciation (Luke 1:38), she consents to bear the Son of God, declaring, “Be it unto me according to thy word.” She believes the angel’s message before anyone else even knows who Jesus is. Her song, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55), contains deep echoes of Jewish messianic hope reinterpreted in light of her pregnancy.

While Mary’s faith predates Jesus’ public ministry and His crucifixion, it anticipates the new order He will inaugurate. In that sense, she may be called the **first Christian in seed-form**—a

proto-believer who assents to the incarnation before the gospel is publicly proclaimed. Her faith is real, but anticipatory; it blossoms fully only after the resurrection, where she is present in the upper room (Acts 1:14).

B. John the Baptist — First to Proclaim

John the Baptist is the first to **publicly proclaim** Jesus as the Messiah, calling Him "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). His role as the forerunner situates him on the boundary between old and new: a prophet in the line of Elijah, but pointing forward to something greater than the Law.

John's baptism of Jesus marks the launch of the messianic mission, and his witness frames Jesus' identity not merely as a teacher or healer, but as the **eschatological fulfillment of Israel's hope**. Yet John dies before the crucifixion and resurrection. He announces the gospel without seeing its climactic event, and thus belongs more to the prophetic threshold than to the Christian community proper. Still, in a transitional sense, he is the **first herald of Christian truth**.

C. Peter — First to Lead

Simon Peter is the **first to confess** Jesus as the Christ (Matthew 16:16) and becomes the **de facto leader** of the post-resurrection Church. Despite his betrayal during the trial of Jesus, Peter is restored and commissioned by the risen Christ: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17).

At Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter preaches the first Christian sermon, proclaiming Jesus' resurrection and calling for repentance and baptism in His name. Thousands respond, forming the embryonic Christian community. In this sense, Peter is the **first Christian leader**, a bridge between the Jewish past and the new ecclesial future.

Peter's role is especially poignant given the author's theological framing: he is a Jew whose faith in the resurrected Christ **transforms** him into something new—a Christian. His leadership embodies the identity shift that follows the crucifixion.

D. Paul — First to Construct Theology

If Peter is the first to lead, **Paul is the first to theologize**. His epistles—written decades before the Gospels—construct the earliest doctrinal framework for Christian identity. Paul articulates that salvation comes through grace, not works of the Law (Galatians 2:16), and that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Galatians 3:28).

Paul's conversion is unique in that it is **post-crucifixion and post-resurrection**. He never knew Jesus in the flesh but encounters Him in divine revelation (Acts 9). In that sense, Paul is the **first Christian who never lived as a Jew under the old covenant while following Christ**. His identity is entirely shaped by the crucified and risen Jesus.

His letters—particularly Romans and Galatians—reflect the theology that underpins the author's central claim: **that the Law has served its purpose, and that Christ is its fulfillment**. Paul does not see himself as an apostate Jew, but as one whose Jewishness has reached its intended goal.

E. Mary Magdalene, Stephen, the Centurion — Testimonial Roles

Several figures serve as **witnesses** to the crucifixion and resurrection—moments foundational to Christian identity:

- **Mary Magdalene** is the **first witness** of the resurrected Christ (John 20:16–18). She is the "apostle to the apostles," bringing the good news to the male disciples. Her role, though often minimized, is foundational.
- **Stephen**, the first Christian martyr, dies for proclaiming Jesus as the Righteous One (Acts 7). He echoes Christ's own words in death, asking forgiveness for his killers. Stephen's martyrdom seals his identity not as a Jew persecuted by Gentiles, but as a **Christian persecuted by Jews**, reinforcing the idea of a religious rupture.
- **The Roman Centurion**, who declares, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39), is the first Gentile to recognize Jesus' divinity **at the moment of death**. His confession aligns with the theological claim that **Christian identity begins in crucifixion**.

These figures are **the first to see, proclaim, or die for the truth of the gospel**, and in doing so, constitute the earliest expressions of Christian witness.

F. Jesus Himself — Embodied Message of the New Faith (Ironically)

Can Jesus be the first Christian?

Theologically, this is paradoxical. Jesus is the **object** of Christian faith, not its subject. Yet in another sense, Jesus **embodies** everything Christianity would later affirm: the kingdom of God, love of neighbor, sacrifice for others, union with the Father. He lives the gospel before it is written, dies before it is preached, and rises before it is systematized.

Paul calls believers to be “in Christ,” suggesting that Jesus is not merely the message, but the **model**. In that light, Jesus is the **first to live the Christian life**, though He Himself never bore the name. Ironically, the movement that would bear His name would not be formed by His teachings alone, but by His death and resurrection.

Scholarly Commentary: “Christian” as a Post-Resurrection Category

Most scholars agree that the label *Christian* does not apply meaningfully until after the resurrection. As noted in Acts 11:26, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch”—and even then, the term was likely **external and derogatory**.

Fredriksen, Dunn, and Baker all emphasize that early followers of Jesus saw themselves as part of a **renewed Judaism**, not a new religion. Only in light of the resurrection and the failure of Jewish acceptance did the term “Christian” gain traction. Theologically, however, this period of liminality is precisely where transformation happens.

Christians Begin at the Cross

Within the theological framework of this paper, the **first Christians are those who recognized Jesus as the Christ in the wake of His crucifixion**. Not merely those who followed Him, but those who saw His death not as defeat, but as **the beginning of the new covenant**. Mary, Peter, Paul, Magdalene, Stephen—each in their own way stood on the far side of the cross and called Jesus *Lord*.

They are not merely "post-Jews" or Jewish reformers. They are **new creations**, born from a covenant that began not at Sinai, but at Golgotha.

VI. Comparative Reflections

As the paper now moves from narrative construction to theological synthesis, the crucial contrasts between Judaism and Christianity emerge more sharply. The crucifixion of Jesus becomes not merely a tragic event or a theological centerpiece, but a **pivot point**—a fulcrum upon which covenantal logic, ritual life, and religious identity turn. From that moment, not only is something new born, but something old is brought to completion.

This section explores that transformation across five critical dimensions: **Covenant vs. Cross**, **Law vs. Grace**, **Continuity vs. Rupture**, **Identity as Performance**, and the underlying thesis: **Judaism as an ended system, Christianity as a fulfilled identity**.

1. Covenant vs. Cross

Judaism is built upon the concept of **covenant**—an agreement initiated by God with Abraham, expanded through Moses, and maintained through obedience, sacrifice, and national fidelity. This covenant is tangible and conditional: "If you obey my commandments... then you will be my treasured possession" (Exodus 19:5). It is enacted through history and reaffirmed in every generation.

By contrast, Christianity locates its origin not in covenantal negotiation, but in the **cross**. The crucifixion is not part of the old agreement—it ruptures it. Jesus does not reaffirm Sinai; He inaugurates **a new covenant in His blood** (Luke 22:20). The cross does not renew the Law; it **declares it finished** (John 19:30). Where covenant involves mutual obligation, the cross offers unilateral grace.

Thus, covenant and cross are not parallel paths—they are **contrasting paradigms**. The first binds Israel in national holiness; the second invites the nations into spiritual sonship. The former requires adherence; the latter requires surrender.

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2. Law vs. Grace

Flowing from this contrast is the central theological divide between **law and grace**. For Jews, the Torah is the gift of God—the embodiment of divine wisdom and instruction. Obedience is covenantal fidelity; observance is identity.

In Christian theology, particularly Pauline, **the Law serves as a tutor**, preparing humanity for something it cannot itself achieve (Galatians 3:24). The Law reveals sin but cannot redeem from it. Only through the grace of Christ—unmerited, unearned, and complete—can humanity be justified. “For by grace you have been saved through faith... not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

This is not a shift in tone—it is a **theological transformation**. Judaism says: “Do this and live.” Christianity says: “You have died, and now you live by grace.” What was external becomes internal; what was law becomes love.

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3. Continuity vs. Rupture

A common modern narrative, especially among interfaith theologians, emphasizes **continuity** between Judaism and Christianity—shared scriptures, shared ethics, even shared messianic hope. And indeed, the New Testament is saturated with the language of the Old. Jesus quotes Torah, fulfills prophecy, and walks in the line of David.

Yet the author's theological position stresses that this continuity is **radically redefined at the cross**. It is not a soft evolution but a hard rupture. Jesus is not a chapter in the Jewish story—He is its **conclusion**. As the curtain tears in the temple (Mark 15:38), so too does the theological thread of covenantal Judaism.

Continuity becomes fulfilled in **telos**—not ongoing partnership, but completed mission. As C.S. Lewis put it in another context, **"the door does not vanish when you walk through it, but you are no longer standing in the doorway."**

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4. Identity as Performance: Passover Becomes Eucharist

One of the most vivid expressions of religious identity is found in ritual. In Judaism, **Passover** is the foundational narrative enacted in every generation: *"In every generation, each person must see themselves as having personally left Egypt."* The Exodus is not merely remembered—it is **performed**.

In Christianity, that performative center shifts to the **Eucharist**. Jesus reinterprets the Passover meal: "This is my body… this is my blood… do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19–20). What had been the memory of national liberation becomes the sacrament of personal redemption. The lamb of Egypt becomes the **Lamb of God** (John 1:29). The cup of deliverance becomes the **cup of salvation**.

Here, identity is not only inherited—it is **enacted** anew. The believer no longer remembers crossing the Red Sea; they commune with the crucified and risen Christ. What had been tribal becomes universal. What had been historical becomes eschatological.

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5. Judaism: An Ended System, Christianity: A Fulfilled Identity

The culmination of these reflections is the theological claim that **Judaism is a completed system**, and Christianity is its **fulfilled expression**. This is not a dismissal of Jewish history or an erasure of its contribution—it is a statement about **salvation history**.

Judaism prepared the world for Christ: through monotheism, covenant, scripture, and ethical law. But its revelatory function—its unique role as the bearer of divine truth—is, in this view, **terminated in the crucifixion**. The covenant was real, the Law was holy, but both find their telos in Jesus. The death of the Messiah is not an interruption—it is the **intended conclusion**.

Christianity, then, is not a replacement but a **transfiguration**. It carries forward the promises, but in a new form—centered not on Sinai, but on Calvary; not on genealogical descent, but on spiritual rebirth.

In this framework, **Christians are not merely Gentiles grafted into Israel (Romans 11:17)**—they are the heirs of a completed mission, living not under shadow, but in light.

VII. Risks and Reconciliations

To claim that Judaism ends with the crucifixion of Jesus is a theologically weighty—and potentially explosive—assertion. While it may be grounded in a coherent Christian narrative of fulfillment, it also touches on centuries of fraught relations between Jews and Christians, and bears historical, ethical, and rhetorical risks that cannot be ignored. If taken as a claim of superiority or finality in dismissive terms, it becomes indistinguishable from the anti-Judaism that has marred much of Christian history. But if handled with theological humility and interpretive generosity, it can be understood not as a statement of erasure, but as a reflection on the **transformation of divine economy**, with both grief and reverence.

This section explores how such a position can be maintained **without hostility**, and how irony, covenantal reverence, and interfaith respect can coexist with theological exclusivity.

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1. Acknowledging the Legacy and Endurance of Judaism

The first step in theological responsibility is **honoring the legacy of Judaism**—not merely as a precursor to Christianity, but as a covenantal tradition with enduring wisdom, beauty, and resilience. Even if one holds that the **revelatory mission of Judaism culminated in Christ**, this does not mean Judaism has no value post-crucifixion. It has continued for two millennia as a living, vibrant faith, sustained through exile, persecution, and renewal.

As Karl Barth put it, **"The Jews are the elder brothers"** of Christians—a phrase popularized later by Pope John Paul II. They carried the oracles of God (Romans 3:2), preserved the Scriptures, and continue to wrestle with the divine in every generation.

To say that Judaism ended in a revelatory sense is not to say that Jewish people, rituals, or interpretations ceased to have meaning. On the contrary, the continuation of Judaism becomes part of the **ongoing divine drama**—a mystery not easily reduced to theological binaries.

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2. Avoiding Anti-Judaism While Maintaining Theological Position

The danger of **anti-Judaism**—a theological contempt for Judaism itself—has historically accompanied Christian triumphalism. From early Church Fathers to medieval polemicists, the narrative of Judaism as obsolete often slid into caricature, persecution, and violence.

But **fulfillment theology does not require contempt**. It can affirm the real significance and divine origin of Judaism while still asserting that it reached its telos in Christ. This view is rooted in Scripture itself: "The law was our guardian until Christ came" (Galatians 3:24). The Law is not false; it is preparatory. It is holy, just, and good (Romans 7:12), but it is not final.

Therefore, this theological claim must be made with **careful distinction**: to say "Judaism ended" in revelatory terms is not to say "Judaism is false" or "Jews are condemned." It is to speak of **completion**, not cancellation. The ethical imperative for Christians is to express this not as boastfulness (Romans 11:18), but as awe and gratitude.

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3. Irony as a Respectful Hermeneutic

Irony plays a key role in this paper's narrative: **that Judaism ends in the death of a Jew**, that the Messiah is rejected by His own people, that the Law is fulfilled by one born under it. These ironies are not rhetorical devices—they are theological signposts pointing to the complexity of divine action.

Using **irony as a hermeneutic** invites humility. It acknowledges that God often acts in ways that overturn human expectation. Just as the cross itself is a scandal and foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:23), so too is the idea that **the chosen people's covenant ends not in triumph, but in a crucified carpenter**.

But irony, handled respectfully, becomes a form of reverence. It does not mock Judaism—it marvels at it. It sees the drama of God unfolding through paradox. It allows one to say: "This was not how the story was expected to end, and yet this is how it was fulfilled."

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4. Interfaith Implications: What Does "Ending" Mean in Religious Terms?

Perhaps the most difficult and necessary question is this: **what does it mean to say a religion has "ended"?**

Clearly, Judaism continues to exist historically, institutionally, and spiritually. Millions of Jews around the world today live by Torah, pray to the God of Abraham, and interpret their scriptures with passion and faith. In that sense, **Judaism has not ended at all**.

But religious endings are not only sociological—they are **theological**. To say that Judaism ended at the cross is to speak from **within a Christian framework**, where covenantal function shifts from one dispensation to another. It is a claim about how **God interacts with humanity**, not a claim about how religious institutions function.

This theological "ending" is not death—it is **transformation**. Like the caterpillar that becomes a butterfly, the external form changes while the essence continues. Judaism, in this view, **metamorphosed**—not into Christianity directly, but into a fulfillment that necessitated new identity, new sacraments, and new community.

The interfaith challenge, then, is to **hold this view without contempt**—to affirm Christian uniqueness without requiring Jewish inferiority. It is to speak of fulfillment while listening with humility. It is to see "ending" as a divine mystery, not a human conquest.

VIII. Conclusion

In the end, there is **no simple answer** to the question of who was the first Jew or the first Christian. Attempts to locate a singular "first" inevitably collide with the complexities of religious history, the layers of scriptural interpretation, and the evolving nature of identity itself. But this lack of simplicity is not a weakness—it is a profound insight. Religious identity is not born in a moment, but in a **narrated tradition**, a story told and retold, shaped by belief, rupture, memory, and meaning.

What this paper has attempted to show is that even in the ambiguity of origins, there are **meaningful trajectories**—patterns that reveal how communities construct themselves around figures like Abraham, Moses, Mary, Peter, and Paul. These "firsts" are not forensic identifications but **symbolic roles**, each playing a part in the unfolding drama of God's interaction with the world. Their lives point forward toward a greater culmination, one that occurs not at Sinai, nor in the courts of David, but on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ stands at the center of this transformation—as both an **ending and a beginning**. From the author's theological standpoint, it marks the **conclusion of Judaism's covenantal role** in salvation history. The temple veil torn, the final sacrifice made, the Law fulfilled—Judaism, in its revelatory mission, has run its divine course. What follows is not merely a reformation, but a **new creation**: the birth of Christianity, sealed in blood and confirmed by resurrection.

In this light, Jesus is not simply the bridge between two religious epochs—He is **the hinge upon which they turn**. He is, paradoxically, **the last Jew and the first Christian**. The last Jew, in that He fully lived under the Law, upheld the covenant, and embodied the prophetic hope of Israel. The first Christian, in that He inaugurates a new covenant through His death, offering not law but grace, not shadow but substance. In His body, both traditions are fulfilled—one completed, the other begun.

Religious identity, then, is not a matter of fixed categories, but of **rupture, irony, and hope**. The rupture comes in the tearing away of the old system, not by rejection, but by fulfillment. The irony lies in the fact that the Jew whose death ends Judaism is also the Savior who founds the Church. And the hope is that from this profound transition emerges a people defined not by genealogy or ritual, but by faith in the risen Christ.

What we are left with is not a linear genealogy of believers, but a **narrative arc**—one that moves from covenant to cross, from commandment to communion, from tribe to universal invitation. This is not merely the story of a religion; it is the story of how God writes new chapters through human history, even when the ending looks like death.

In that death, something ended. In that same death, something began. And in that mystery, the Christian faith continues to confess: **Jesus is both the last and the first.**

Epilogue: A Hypothetical "Christian Israel" Would Not Conduct a Genocide in Palestine

If Judaism, as argued in this paper, reaches its covenantal conclusion in the crucifixion of Jesus, and if Christianity is the transformed continuation of that divine narrative—a new identity born in grace, sustained in love, and modeled after a crucified Savior—then a pressing question arises: **What does it mean to act as the "people of God" in the world today?** The theological and ethical implications of that identity are not merely doctrinal—they are moral, embodied, and historical.

In light of the **recent findings by the United Nations Commission of Inquiry**, and the legal proceedings underway in the **International Court of Justice** and the **International Criminal Court**, the question of religious identity and state violence becomes tragically relevant. Israel, a nation whose historical and symbolic existence is often defended through the language of chosenness and covenant, now faces allegations of genocide against the Palestinian people—allegations grounded in the destruction of civilian infrastructure, mass starvation, targeted killings, and statements that indicate a systematic dehumanization of an entire population.

This epilogue does not pretend neutrality. It speaks from within the theological arc presented throughout this work: **that Judaism, as a revelatory system, ended with the crucifixion, and that Christianity is its fulfillment—not only in doctrine, but in ethics.** To be Christian is to be shaped not by conquest, but by crucifixion; not by tribal exclusivity, but by universal mercy. The Gospel is not a mandate for land, but a commission for love. It does not sanctify violence; it absorbs it.

Therefore, a **hypothetical "Christian Israel"**—a nation truly defined by the teachings and person of Christ—**could not perpetrate genocide**. It could not bomb hospitals, starve children, or

rationalize collective punishment. A Christian Israel would weep with the wounded, feed its enemies, and see the image of God in the face of every Palestinian. It would remember that the blood that inaugurated its covenant was **not the blood of others**, but its own.

The irony is searing: the cross, which once ended the old covenant, now indicts those who act as if chosenness absolves them from justice. If Jesus is the last Jew, then any attempt to invoke divine privilege for domination after His death is a theological anachronism. The people of God, redefined in the crucified Messiah, have no more enemies to kill—only neighbors to love.

This epilogue is not a political program. It is a theological lament. It mourns a world in which the language of holiness has been conscripted into the service of violence. And it points to a better way—one born on a hill called Golgotha, where God absorbed human wrath to make room for divine peace.

A Christian Israel would not commit genocide. It would carry its cross.

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